



## Letter to the Editor

## Response to: Tormey WP. Tobacco toxicity ignored as a cause of death. Why? J Forens Legal Med 2012;19:239

Dear Sir,

I refer to the correspondence by Dr Tormey on the need for including tobacco toxicity in death certificates.<sup>1</sup> Although I do not disagree with Dr Tormey that tobacco smoking is a potent risk factor for the development of a wide range of lethal diseases, including ischaemic heart disease and respiratory tract cancers, I do not think it is reasonable to necessarily include tobacco toxicity in the cause of death in such cases.

Firstly, not all cases of lethal ischaemic heart disease and respiratory tract cancer in patients who smoke have those diseases as result of exposure to tobacco smoke, although I accept that especially in the case of many respiratory tract cancers that link is very strong. On the other hand, the aetiology of ischaemic heart disease is multifactorial, and although tobacco smoking is a significant risk factor on a population basis, it would be a mistake to elevate that risk factor to an underlying cause in an individual case. For example, that patient may also have been overweight, had dyslipidaemia, may have had diabetes mellitus, not exercised as much as is desirable or may have had any number of other documented risk factors for the development of coronary artery disease. Sadly, in an individual case, it is more often the case than not that none of these risk factors can be elevated to being causative to the exclusion of others.

Secondly, Dr Tormey compares tobacco toxicity to lethal poisonings from drugs such as amphetamines, opioids, antidepressants and benzodiazepines. The difference here is that an excess of these mentioned drugs at a point in time can certainly result in death, due to for example respiratory depression or cardiac arrhythmia. However, tobacco does not operate in such a way. The major active psychotropic ingredient in tobacco, nicotine, rarely causes acute

lethal poisoning, and it is rather a mélange of compounds, many without psychotropic effect, which over time result in damage to the body.

By all means include tobacco smoking, or more correctly tobacco use disorder, as a significant contributor to the death, but I suggest that incorrectly giving tobacco toxicity as a cause of ischaemic heart disease or respiratory tract cancer if anything degrades the very real health problems which tobacco smoking causes.

### Funding

None.

### Conflict of interest

None declared.

### Reference

1. Tormey WP. Tobacco toxicity ignored as a cause of death. Why? *J Forens Legal Med* 2012;19:239.

Johan Duflou, FRCPA, FFFLM, Chief Forensic Pathologist,  
Clinical Professor\*

Department of Forensic Medicine Sydney, University of Sydney,  
42-50 Parramatta Road, Glebe NSW 2037, Australia

\* Tel.: +61 2 8584 7800; fax: +61 2 9552 1613.

E-mail address: [jo.duflou@sswhs.nsw.gov.au](mailto:jo.duflou@sswhs.nsw.gov.au)

4 June 2012

Available online 6 July 2012